



SHARP FACTS

Choosing Safer Options Reduces Risk



Introduction

Nearly 1 million Americans are infected with HIV, most of them through sexual transmission. As many as one-third of these people don't even know they are infected. One in three cases of HIV infection in the U.S. now occurs in a woman. About half of all infected women and some infected men were infected by heterosexual contact.¹ HIV is spread between men and women. In fact, women in the U.S. and around the world are becoming increasingly affected by HIV. Approximately 46%, or 14.8 million, of the 32.4 million adults living with HIV or AIDS worldwide are women. An estimated 15.3 million new sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, occur each year in the United States. Experts estimate that one in four Americans will become infected with a sexually transmitted disease in their lifetime. Effective strategies for preventing these diseases are critical.

How can we reduce our risk of getting one of these diseases? What are the options?

Abstain from sex or delay sex

Refraining from having sexual intercourse with an infected partner is the best way to prevent transmission of HIV and other STDs. People can choose to not have sex. People can also decide to wait, or delay sex, until a later time in their life. They may choose to have personal relationships that do not involve sex.

Choose Outer-course vs. Intercourse

Outer-course is non-penetrative contact, such as massaging, hugging, and kissing. Non-penetrative contact vs. intercourse can eliminate transmission risk for HIV and most (though not all) STDs.

But, if you choose to have sex, there are things you can do to reduce the risk of acquiring a sexually transmitted disease, including HIV:

Monogamy

Monogamy is sex between two people, who only have sex with each other, as part of a long-term relationship. If neither partner is infected, there is no risk of disease transmission. Getting to know your partner and his/her sexual history before you decide to have sex can also reduce your chance of exposure to disease. A series of short-term relationships is not as safe because of the increased risk that one of those partners will be infected.

Use Condoms and other barriers

Although not as safe as abstinence or monogamy, the correct and consistent use of latex condoms during sexual intercourse - vaginal, anal, or oral - can greatly reduce a person's risk of acquiring or transmitting many STDs, including HIV infection. In fact, recent studies provide compelling evidence that latex condoms are highly effective in protecting against HIV infection when used for every act of intercourse. A variety of male condoms are available. Female condoms and oral barriers are also available. Condoms can reduce both the risk of pregnancy and the risk of disease transmission. Put the condom on before any vaginal, anal, or oral contact.

Condoms can be expected to provide different levels of risk reduction for different STDs. There is no one definitive study about condom effectiveness for all STDs. Several studies have demonstrated that condoms can reduce the risk of acquiring chlamydia, gonorrhea, trichomoniasis, syphilis, chancroid and herpes. However, because not all studies have demonstrated protective effects, the body of evidence is considered inconclusive. In addition, definitive data are lacking regarding the degree of risk reduction that latex condoms provide in preventing transmission of genital Humanpapilloma Virus. It is important to note that the lack of data about the level of condom effectiveness indicates that more research is needed - not that latex condoms don't work.

Plastic Condoms. Studies show that the new polyurethane condoms have the same barrier qualities as latex. Lab testing has shown that particles as small as sperm and HIV cannot pass through this polyurethane material. A study of the effectiveness of this polyurethane condom for prevention of pregnancy and STDs is underway. The

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new polyurethane condoms offer an alternative for condom users who are allergic to latex. Also, polyurethane condoms can be made thinner than latex, have no odor, and are safe for use with oil-based lubricants.

Condoms for Women. The "Reality" female condom™, also made of polyurethane, is lubricated and disposable. The lubricant is non-spermicidal. One study of this condom as a contraceptive indicates a failure rate of 21-26 percent in 1 year among typical users; for those who use the female condom correctly and consistently, the rate was approximately 5 percent. Unlike the male condom, the female condom™ protects the external female genitalia because its outer edge remains outside the vagina during sex - resulting in less skin-to-skin contact. If a male condom cannot, or will not be used, consider using a female condom.

Reduce the number of sexual partners

Many people who are infected with an STD don't know it, and you can't tell just by looking at them. The more people a person has sex with, the more likely it is that one (or more) will be infected with an STD. Though not as safe as abstinence or monogamy, reducing the number of people a person has sex with can reduce risk by reducing the number of potential exposures.

Do not have sex with "high-risk" people

You can't tell if potential partners are "high risk" just by looking at them. People who may be at higher risk of having a sexually transmitted infection include those who trade sex for money or sex for drugs, because they may have sex with many other people. Other people who may be at higher risk are people who share needles, because this activity can result in HIV, Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C infections, which can then be spread sexually. Non-monogamous men who have sex with men are also at higher risk of being infected with HIV and Hepatitis B because the risk of transmitting these viruses is greater with receptive anal intercourse than with vaginal or oral intercourse, and because these men may have many sex partners. Though not as safe as abstinence or monogamy, avoiding sex with "high-risk" people can reduce risk of exposure to a sexually transmitted infection.

Other things that can reduce the risk of infection with HIV or other STDs are:

Do not share needles or "works"

The safest thing a person can do is to not inject (non-prescription) drugs. For people who do continue to inject drugs, use a new, sterile needle from a reliable source each time. HIV and other viruses can be spread whenever needles are contaminated with blood - even small quantities of blood which may not be visible to the naked eye. This is true of all needles - including needles used for steroids, tattooing or body piercing. If sterile needles cannot be used, disinfect needles and syringes before and after each use.

Stay sober

Use of drugs or alcohol can affect sexual behavior because of reduced inhibitions and clouded judgment. Stay in control - stay sober.

Where can I get more information?

Your medical care provider should be consulted if you think you may have been exposed to any sexually transmitted disease. CDC provides information through their National STD Hotline at (800) 227-8922 and their National AIDS Hotline at (800) 342-AIDS (2437). For further information regarding your sexual health, visit the SHARP Home Page at <http://www-nehc.med.navy.mil/hp/sharp>.

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